



Life Group Sermon Notes
“God's Not Dead: The Evidence”
Dr. Rice Broocks - April 3, 2016

Warm Up (10-15 minutes)

Choose a question below to answer, or ask another. No right or wrong answers.

- What is one of the main skepticisms you've heard from people who doubt the Gospel?
- What do you think is the greatest intellectual challenge to believing the Gospel?
- Have you ever read a book that presents the reasonableness of the Christian faith? If so, what was it and was it helpful? If not, do you know of one you'd like to read?

Word (10-15 minutes)

Sermons can be heard online at www.bethelworld.org

John 20:31 “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is greater than for nearly any other historical event or person of that time. A majority of historians recognize several facts that lead to that conclusion. During a trial scene in the movie, Lee Strobel, who is Professor of Christian Thought at Houston Baptist University and the author of more than twenty books about Christianity, including *The Case for Christ*, lists several of these facts, including Jesus's death, burial, and appearances to His disciples after the resurrection. Lee also mentions that basic details of Jesus's life are confirmed by non-Christian historical sources as well as the historical accounts in Scripture. Therefore, these events are not just religious beliefs that must be accepted by faith; they are historical facts that we can confidently accept as true.

Here is an overview of that evidence.

1. He lived. (Jesus is a person of history.)

The existence of Jesus in history is irrefutable. The evidence is so overwhelming that virtually all historians would recognize this fact. The only place where this is challenged is in the murky online world of Internet skeptics.

The evidence for the existence of Jesus is not only affirmed through the reliable historical records in Scripture but also by other sources as well. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote during the time of Jesus. He was writing on behalf of Rome and was not sympathetic to Christianity. There were other historians and writers as well, such as Tacitus and Pliny, who spoke about Jesus and established His existence in history.

It's important to remember that historians determine the validity of an event or a person's existence usually based on one or two sources. Many times these sources were written long after the event took place or the person lived. For instance, the main sources for Alexander the Great were written more than three hundred years after the reported events. And all but one of the main sources on the Roman

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emperor Tiberius, a contemporary of Jesus, were written more than eighty years later. In contrast, the Gospels were written within thirty to sixty-five years after Jesus's resurrection. The fact that there are several ancient sources, along with the witness of the Gospels, makes the existence of Jesus of Nazareth a part of the historical bedrock.

2. He died. (Jesus's death is a historical fact.)

Almost two billion people believe that Jesus's crucifixion had something to do with their sins being forgiven by God. His death by crucifixion is well attested by history. The first-century historian Josephus wrote, "When Pilate upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, condemned him to be crucified" (Antiquities 18.63-64). The crucifixion is also attested by Tacitus, who is generally regarded as the greatest of the Roman historians. The Annals, Tacitus's last work, was written ca. AD 116–117 and included, "Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion] during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus" (Annals 15.44). There are other ancient sources that we could mention, but these are sufficient to establish this fact in history.

Looking beyond the actual event of Christ being crucified to examining the meaning behind this act yields a life-changing message. As Paul later wrote approximately twenty years after the crucifixion, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Christ's death was in fulfillment of the words of the prophets. The most significant of these was the prophet Isaiah (53:4–5).

His death paid the price for our sins and provided the healing that we need for our broken spiritual condition. Through His death we can have life. This truth explains why Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). We were powerless to reestablish our relationship with God and to fix ourselves. Jesus had to live the life we were meant to live and die the death we were meant to die. Only He could be a perfect sacrifice to cover our sins, and only He had the power to defeat death and provide the path to eternal life.

3. He rose again. (The resurrection verified His identity.)

The most significant fact recognized even by skeptics is that Jesus's disciples believed that they encountered him after He rose from the dead. No other conclusion could explain what would have brought such a sudden and dramatic transformation in His followers. After Jesus was arrested, His disciples initially denied (Matthew 26:70) or abandoned him (Mark 14:50). Shortly afterward, they boldly declared to hostile audiences—in the very city where the events had taken place—that they had encountered the risen Jesus.

In addition, the first witnesses of the resurrection were the women who initially discovered the empty tomb. Their testimony is significant since the testimony of women at that time was not even accepted in a court of law. No one would have chosen them to establish the truth of the story. The fact of the empty tomb is also significant, since it indicates that the disciples did not encounter Jesus's spirit, which had left His body, but a physical Jesus with a resurrected body.

Jesus not only appeared to His followers, but He also appeared to two prominent skeptics. James, the half brother of Jesus, initially doubted Jesus's claims (Mark 3:21), but later became a leader of the Church. The reason for this dramatic change of heart? He saw Jesus alive after He had been raised from the dead. And Saul of Tarsus, the man who initially persecuted the early Christians, became a follower of Christ. Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and appointed him as an ambassador to the Gentiles. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul (Saul) described Jesus appearing to Peter, the other disciples, James, himself, and five hundred others, many of whom were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:5–8).

Paul's description of the appearances is particularly important, since he received it directly from Peter and James (Galatians 1:18–19) within five years of the resurrection. Paul wrote it in the form of a creed, which is an organized record of key beliefs. Creeds take time to become so formalized, so the message of the

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resurrection and the description of the appearances must have been proclaimed by the apostles very shortly after they happened. Therefore, they could not have been legends (which develop over time) in the early church.

The best explanation for the described facts is that Jesus actually rose from the dead. Skeptics have argued that the disciples made up the stories, but no motivation exists for such deliberate deception. What could possibly have caused these followers to initially flee for their lives and then conspire to make up the resurrection? Some of the disciples were sentenced to death for preaching the resurrection, yet none recanted to save his life. Many have died for believing something to be true, but no one dies for a story they know is a lie. In addition, a conspiracy by the disciples or a “group hallucination” (which is unprecedented) could not explain the appearances to James and Paul. Other equally implausible alternative explanations have been presented, but none can withstand even the slightest scrutiny.

4. He is Lord. (Jesus has the right to govern our lives.)

The resurrection of Jesus verified His identity as the Son of God. As Paul wrote, “And who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:4). Paul used the same term “lord” for Jesus in his letters (Romans 10:9) as he did when referring to God (Romans 9:27–28). Paul went even further by stating that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:15–16).

Jesus’ miracles were astounding and undeniable testimonies to his divine power. Yet the ultimate proof of his divine identity was the fact that after He had died the horrible death of crucifixion through the hands of the Romans, He was alive again in three days. This verified He was who He said He was.

The fact that Jesus is Lord means He has the right to direct every area of our lives. Many look to Jesus as a counselor or consultant, but He has called us to make His teachings and commands our highest priority. In fact, He taught His followers, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34–35). The Christian faith does not work for many because they wish to fit Jesus into their lives instead of fitting their lives into Jesus’s mission.

5. His words are true. (We can trust the Gospels.)

The fact that Jesus is the resurrected Lord means that the words He spoke are the very words of God. When Jesus spoke, His words carried ultimate authority. Realizing that Jesus really lived and was crucified and raised from the dead on our behalf means that, as His followers, we treat His words with the ultimate respect and honor.

It’s important to know that even though we have cited sources outside the New Testament to support such facts as the existence of Jesus, His death, and the empty tomb, we are in no way dismissing the reliability and authority of the Bible. Some skeptics argue that we can’t use the Bible to defend the truth of our faith because the people who wrote it were believers and therefore biased. That is like saying if you’re an American, you cannot be trusted to write a fair history of the United States.

The Bible is not one book, but a collection of books. The New Testament includes twenty-seven documents written by at least eight different authors. These writings are the best source for our knowledge about Jesus Christ. They not only attest to what others in history have claimed, but they also provide much more extensive details. Moreover, they explain the meaning and significance of the recorded events. And these writings have been shown to be accurate by enormous amounts of historical and archeological evidence.

There are many pieces of evidence that prove the reliability of the Gospels. In particular, the similarities and differences between the accounts of the Gospel writers perfectly match what would be expected of independent eyewitnesses accurately describing what actually happened.

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The Gospel's reliability is further supported by several other factors. The authors wrote too recently after Jesus's ministry to have distorted the events. The Gospels also contain details that were embarrassing to the early church. For instance, they all describe the disciples misunderstanding Jesus's teaching and abandoning or denying him after He was arrested. No author would have made up such embarrassing stories unless they actually happened. In addition, numerous historical discoveries have confirmed even minor details in the Gospels and the book of Acts, such as names of rulers, cultural practices, and historical events. In summary, no competent historian would doubt that the Gospels and Acts accurately describe Jesus's teaching and ministry unless that scholar assumed the documents were unreliable from the beginning.

Discussion (10-15 minutes)

Choose an item below to discuss, or introduce another related point for discussion.

- Were you surprised that historians verified Jesus's existence and crucifixion outside of what was written in Scripture? Why or why not?
- Why is the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection so important to the Gospel?
- If Jesus is truly Lord, what are the implications for your life?

Prayer (10-15 minutes)

Pray for any of the following, as well as any other requests you may have.

- Ask God to show you areas where His words have not been obeyed in your life. Ask him to help
- Ask God to help you learn and understand more about the reliability of Scripture and the reasonableness of the Gospel.
- Ask God to help you effectively engage in conversations with non-Christians about the Gospel.